

Pyrotechnic Sculpture

Institute Conference

30th November 2013

Henry Moore Institute, 10.30-6pm

‘Pyrotechnic Sculpture’: it is not about destruction

Katinka Seeger opened the day of presentations on ‘pyrotechnic sculpture’ introducing the practice of explosion as an artistic tool. Intervening on painting to turn it into an ephemeral sculpture (Yves Klein) or experimenting with performative destruction (*Destruction in Art* symposium, 1966), different art practices of the 1960s saw the artist as a provocateur and as an igniter of effects that he could choreograph but not fully predict. The use of explosions and open flames showed a making of art that relinquished control not only of its formal outcome but also of the process of its making. Fire and its performance opened the way to a redefinition of the artistic object (subject to the changes of both its form and its status), its stability (the unpredictability of organic processes and chemical reactions), and genre (sculpture as dynamic and ephemeral). Burning and explosion transform both the form and the status of the artistic object, but do not destroy art. Insofar as the physical destruction of the art object constitutes an artistic intervention art cannot be destroyed – an argument supported, with different focus and through different examples, by all the conference speakers.

Marin Sullivan showed how Alberto Burri’s *Combustioni Plastiche*, employing combustion as their raw matter, blurred the boundaries of painting and sculpture. Slow and methodical, Burri’s work on the surface is not an attack made to destroy but to find and trans-form, and his use of the flame remains a tool of personal material investigation, even when televised.

Claire Louise Staunton showed how burning, explosion and destruction became a staged event in John Latham’s work. In his *Skoob Tower* ceremonies steel structures filled with books, encyclopedias or magazines were burnt down in a symbolic destruction of systematized knowledge. The event as collapse of time and as irruption of the unpredictable (Alain Badiou) is here the agent of change of the ‘live’ material of sculpture, as ‘the only essential element in sculpture is time’ (John Latham).

Latham's statement lent the title to Rozemin Keshvani's presentation of a selection of contemporary practices, while Ursula Ströbele's examined the different use of time in recent works of 'sculpture as performance', from the slow planning of a sudden burst (Andreas Greiner and Armin Keplinger) to the hypnotic repetition of a choreographed ritual (Anish Kapoor).

Mari Dumett's analysis of Jean Tinguely's *Homage to New York* (1960), the bewildering metamachine that went literally wild in the MoMA courtyard where it was being presented, showed that the practice of explosion in art is not only a tool, but indeed performs a (disruptive) critical role. Made of junk discarded by the capitalist metropolis, Tinguely's work mocked the wealth and the scale of the city and the grandeur of the host institution. While the 'uselessness' of the anti-machine performed a critique of its surroundings, its unpredictability (but was its failure really unintentional?) proclaimed the ultimate act of affirmation of the work of art by self-destruction.

This is echoed in the work of British artist Michael Landy. In conversation with Richard Calvocoressi, Landy discussed some of his projects in which the "work" of art is to perform, through self-destruction, a critique of consumerism (*Market*, 1990), of identity (*Break Down*, 2001), of the art market (*Art Bin*, 2010) and of inherited cultural and religious beliefs (*Saints Alive*, 2013).